

Auditor suggests \$21M in savings

Wagner outlines
methods to cut
state's costs

By Drew Volturo
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DOVER — Delaware could save more than \$21 million annually through a series of state office reorganizations, expenditure reviews and cost-saving measures, according to a report the state auditor's office released Thursday.

The report details streamlining student testing, cutting back on prison food, filling vacant positions at the state psychiatric hospital, reviewing cell phone usage and standardizing school blueprints.

State Auditor R. Thomas Wagner Jr. said the idea to assemble the proposal, which was distributed to legislators and the governor's office last week, came in the wake of state-ordered budget cuts for government offices for fiscal 2009.

"We cut our budget by 19 percent and I said let's do some brainstorming and go over past audits and see where we could find some savings," Mr. Wagner said.

"This is the time for everyone to work together and come up with ideas, and not worry about which political party you belong to or which branch of government you are."

Mr. Wagner is a Republican. Democratic Gov. Ruth Ann Minner is facing a \$217.3 million gap between revenue projections and her proposed \$3.41 billion operating budget for fiscal 2009.



R. Thomas Wagner Jr.



Jennifer W. Davis

"I certainly don't have all the solutions. These are just some of our options," Mr. Wagner said.

While all ideas are welcome, Office of Management and Budget director Jennifer W. Davis said that several of the auditor's suggestions already are under consideration.

A proposal to administer the Delaware Student Testing Program to only the required grades, at a savings of \$4.53 million, already was partly implemented, she noted.

The legislative Joint Finance Committee voted Wednesday to eliminate the writing portion of the DSTP for third-, fourth-, sixth-, seventh- and ninth-graders next year, tests that are not federally required by No Child Left Behind.

But, Mrs. Davis said, the state's agreement with the federal government would become complicated, and funding could be lost, if the state started axing other portions of the test.

Proposals to fill vacant positions — a Comprehensive Annual Financial Report (CAFR) management position in the auditor's office and 99 Delaware Psychiatric Center positions — could save more than \$1.2 million, according

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to Mr. Wagner's report.

"We've twice posted for (the CAFR) position" without hiring anyone, Mrs. Davis said. "And do you know how hard it is to recruit for DPC with all the media coverage it has gotten?"

DPC has been under fire for several months amid accusations of physical, emotional and financial abuse of patients and worker intimidation. A House subcommittee and governor's task force have examined the facility and recommended several changes to the hospital.

Another proposal in the auditor's report, reviewing the state workforce and eliminating excessive or duplicative positions, is something Mrs. Davis said her office has been doing since February, when a hiring review was put in place. That has since been turned into a hiring freeze.

Mr. Wagner also proposed e-mailing pension statement to current state employees rather than mailing them, which would save the state \$76,575 annually.

Mrs. Davis noted that not all state workers have computers, but Mr. Wagner countered that each state employee could have

access to a computer while at work and enter their data and recover the information they need.

"The state certainly has enough PCs (personal computers) around for people to check their pensions," he said.

JFC co-chair Rep. William A. Oberle Jr., R-Newark, said it's common for "so-called experts" to come along during times excessive or tight finances and offer their thoughts on what should be done, but they are not involved in the intricacies of the situation.

"It's nice to take a broad brush stroke from the outside in," Rep. Oberle said, calling it an "uninformed viewpoint."

Said Mr. Wagner: "I didn't realize the state auditor wasn't on the inside."

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William A. Oberle Jr.